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SUBJECT: Vietnamese Brides in Southern Taiwan -  
Increasingly a "Social Problem"

REF: A) HO CHI MINH CITY 01299 B) TAIPEI 3233

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1. Summary. Foreign brides, and their social and educational problems have once more captured considerable attention in the wake of late 2005 news coverage of a group of Vietnamese women entering Taiwan (ref A) via marriage documents for the actual purpose of prostitution. While a few Vietnamese women have admitted that they were brought to Taiwan as "brides" to disguise their intent to work in the sex trade, others claim they came legitimately as brides and only later abandoned their Taiwan husbands and children to engage in sex work. Citizens in Southern Taiwan believe the continuing influx of foreign brides (in particular those from Southeast Asian countries) is lowering the average educational and social level of the Taiwan population and that these foreign brides will, to a certain degree, create learning and social impediments for their own children. They may also create a new political force in local politics to defend their interests. End summary.

2. On the December 23, 2005, Apple Daily reported Police Administration statistics that show by November 2005 nearly 16,000 Southeast Asian women, two-thirds of whom were Vietnamese citizens, disappeared after entering Taiwan for the purpose of marriage. The report claimed ten thousand of these women possibly were controlled by a local foreign bride broker but were sent on to work in the sex industry in almost all places on Taiwan except Yilan County, Tainan County, and Taitung County. In a separate report, the same paper reported that a 22 year old Vietnamese woman, who has been in Taiwan for over one year, left her Taiwan husband after three months and became a prostitute in Taipei County.

3. According to Foreign Affairs police in Kaohsiung County, an estimated 20,000 Vietnamese women currently make their homes in southern Taiwan's Chiayi, Tainan, Kaohsiung, Pingtung, Taitung, and Penghu counties. These Vietnamese brides mainly come from poor families in Vietnam's southwestern regions. They have chosen marriage to Taiwanese men as a way to escape poverty. Most of them marry through matchmakers or intermediaries and have little chance to get to know their husbands or their future families before they agree to marry a Taiwanese husband, who often may be advanced in age or even infirm.

14. Most Taiwan men marrying Southeast Asian women also come from lower socioeconomic classes (ref B). The foreign brides are frustrated that they are "used" by their husbands and the in-law families as an all-in-one solution. In addition to being a wife, they are a housekeeper, nurse to the aged in-laws, cheap labor in the family business, child-bearing machine, and caregiver for offspring. In some cases, they have to also work outside the home. However, due to lack of work and language skills, the foreign brides can take only marginal jobs that pay minimal wages (in Southern Taiwan this primarily translates into wrapping betel nut). When they realize their illusions of marrying into a better life are shattered, some of them choose to leave their husbands and children to enter the sex trade to earn more substantial sums of money. They then discover that, in the case of divorce, Taiwan's current legal regulations disadvantage foreign spouses. Courts in Taiwan usually give custody of the children to the father, usually reviewing educational and financial prospects of the children to decide. As a result, Vietnamese mothers who leave Taiwan or abandon their husbands almost always lose their children.

15. The extent of the foreign bride issue recently shocked a rural mountain village in Nanhua Town, Tainan County. The town's household registry office recently announced that over 35 percent of its residents' new 2004 marriages involved a foreign bride, while the divorce rate of these "migration marriages" was a historically high of nearly 19 percent. These figures were both higher than the County's official record of the average annual 15.5 percent of new marriage with foreign spouses and annual 5.1 percent of divorce rate. County police and household affairs officials, however, suspect that the figures do not reflect the real dimensions of the

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problem. Instead, they estimate that the divorce rate in the County would be even higher if many Taiwan parties to these arranged marriages were not too reluctant or ashamed to initiate formal divorce proceedings based on grounds of abandonment by a foreign-born spouse. As divorce proceedings often end in the deportation of the foreign spouse, many of the women simply choose to abscond and not go through a divorce.

16. Tainan County, a leading agricultural area in Southern Taiwan, in 2004 announced over 9,000 newborns in the County, with one seventh of the newborns born to foreign mothers. The County also announced that nearly 2,000 "new Taiwanese" (ref B) have enrolled in public schools this year. These enrollments are expected to increase in the following semesters. An official of the County's Education Bureau admitted that the increasing enrollment of these "new Taiwanese" has begun to strain severely the County's educational resources. As has happened in other places in Taiwan, school teachers in the County have to arrange additional courses for these students since they were found to be comparatively slow learners, possibly due to the limited language skills or educational background of the mother.

17. According to Chen Kui-ying, Section Chief of the Social Affairs Bureau in Kaohsiung City, the Executive Yuan has set aside approximately USD 40 million over the next ten years for assistance activities associated with foreign brides. In Kaohsiung City, Chen said, that a special task force consisting of officials from the Bureaus of Social Affairs, Education, Civil Affairs, Cultural Affairs, the Police Administration, and the Information Department, has been organized to develop programs to help the foreign brides learn Chinese and better integrate into the society. In addition, Chen went on to say that the City Government also has offered

a subsidy of over USD 220,000 annually each to several major social organizations, including the Eden Social Welfare Foundation and the Kaohsiung Branch of Taiwan Fund for Children and Families to support the integration of these women into local society.

¶8. Hsu Shu-jong, a teacher of the community university in Fengshan in Kaohsiung County, who is also an active volunteer of NAFIA, an NGO devoted to human-care issues, has long devoted herself to helping minorities, including the foreign brides in town. She confirmed the government has become more willing to concern itself over the lives and futures of migrated spouses. Hsu, however, opined that the government's distribution of financial aid has been less appropriate and applies only to the activities that meet the government's strict criteria for assistance. (e.g. sheltering from domestic violence, Mandarin training, and legal aid). Hsu went on to say that the government needs to institute appropriate regulations to govern the actual migration of these women into Taiwan and, at least, stop the illegal labor and marriage brokers. (Note: According to a December 29, 2005, Taipei Times articles, the proposed amendments to the Immigration Law currently are under review in Taiwan's Legislative Yuan. One KMT lawmaker on the LY's Home and Nations Committee has suggested that all advertisements and commercials for marriage brokers should be banned. End note.) Since immigration into Taiwan will become more and more common, she noted, the government and the entire society need to develop an active and efficient strategy to transform the burdens it now perceives accompany these migrations into a positive influx of labor into the work force.

¶9. The Foreign Affairs Police (FAP) in Taitung were quick to point out that the actual level of domestic violence in the arranged marriages of Vietnamese women to men in Taitung is half the rate of local Taiwan-Taiwan marriages. Taitung's FAP officer devoted to domestic violence issues says the shelters for abused women take in Vietnamese spouses readily, without prejudice. However, the Taitung Foreign Affairs Police noted that demographic trends over the next few years are likely to cause the Taiwan central government to pay far more serious attention to these foreign brides. Of primary concern in Taitung is that strong networks forming among Vietnamese brides will lead them to organize voting blocs

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that eventually will influence local politics around the island. Currently, these networks function only to shelter and protect abused women and/or to provide informal counseling on how to extract women from a bad situation.

¶10. Below are figures provided by local Foreign Affairs Police of numbers of the foreign brides coming from 1) Vietnam, and 2) other Southeast Asian Countries, e.g. Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, who currently reside in Southern Taiwan in 2005:

Area	Vietnamese Brides	Brides from other SEA Countries
Chiayi	3055	3789
Tainan	4783	5869
Kaohsiung	6990	8882
Pingtung	3416	4518
Taitung	668	879
Penghu	600	800
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Total	19512	24737

¶11. Comment. Social and cultural pressure on Vietnamese brides in Southern Taiwan is enormous as they try to fit into a society that sees them, in the media and privately, as a problem. Government attempts in southern Taiwan to integrate them effectively are only beginning

to address some of the issues these women face in entering and living in a foreign area. Ongoing discussions on revising the immigration law hopefully will include clauses that expand and protect the rights of foreign spouses. However, it does not seem yet that the government intends to focus any of its programs at educating Taiwanese on diversity or multi-cultural issues as they relate to Vietnamese brides. End comment.

Thiele

Keegan